

Somewhere Only We Know

by Elfpen

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Summary: His tribe thought he was dead, but after eight long years in slavery, Hiccup finds his way back to Berk. A broken man, he struggles to understand the word 'home' while his friends and family pull together the pieces of his story. Maybe, in time, they can all find some kind of peace. Maybe. Spawned from the Slave AU that AvannaK and I created on tumblr. Warnings for... everything.

## 1. Prologue: Here Lies Hiccup

\*\*A/N: \*\*This story is a cocktail of ideas that came into being after I had a very strange, involved, and lengthy dream involving Hiccup becoming a slave in continental Europe. I told AvannaK on tumblr about it, and we bounced ideas off each other (and she drew some heart-wrenching fanart) and I brainstormed an entire storyline and promised to write it â€“eventually- aaaannnd here we are.

I will not make any promises at all about updates on this story, because I have to finish Umbreytingu first and then I might get to this one more, maybe, if I have time. But know that it's on my to do list.

\* \* \*

><p>No one said anything to him when he came ashore with his father. There was staring involved. Whispering. But no conversation, no 'weclome home's. He didn't seem to notice or care. His eyes were fixed on the village itself, the buildings, the pathways, the docks and the ships he hadn't seen for half a lifetime. His eyes were wide, scared, but like steel. Stoick had taken his arm to help him off the boat, and he hadn't let go. Under the cover of the cloak the Scots had given him, his hand dug white-knuckled into his father's arm. Only Stoick could hear that he'd begun to breathe faster.</p>

"Gods aboveâ€|" they whispered.

"â€|so tall,"

"â€|been doing to him?"

"â€|too skinny,"

"â€|didn't even recognize-"

"â€|around his neck,"

"â€|hair?"

"â€|\_Hiccup\_."

If he heard anything they said, he didn't react. His eyes were darting back and forth, scanning, picking, recognizing, remembering. About halfway through the village, as their house on the hill came into view, his emotionless gaze finally began to shine with tears. Stoick knew they ought to make this last leg of their journey fast, but before he could quicken his pace, Gobber appeared. He was the first one who didn't say anything, and the first one who Hiccup noticed. A small noise in the back of his throat tried to give voice to the recognition, but he couldn't make his mouth work.

Gobber's mouth fell open, and he almost said something, but at the last second he swallowed the urge, inhaled shakily, and came up beside father and son.

"Help me get him to the house," Stoick said. Gobber nodded, shooing people away as they walked briskly up the path. He put his hand on Hiccup's shoulder to steady him, but the boy â€"no, \_man\_ â€" flinched away like he'd been struck. Gobber whispered a half apology and replaced his hand very, very gently. Hiccup was shivering beneath his warm clothes.

The door swung open. Stoick had expected a bigger reaction. Hiccup just stood there in the door, not a word, not a movement. They ushered him in and set him down in Stoick's own chair. They blanketed him and stoked the fire up, hoping he'd stop shivering, but knowing it wasn't for the cold. He stared like a dead man at the trappings around him, hearth, shields, stairs, rafters. Gobber offered to go find some food and cider. Hiccup did not move.

Then, suddenly, he sucked in a breath and it came out as a whimper. Silently, in the way he'd trained himself over the better part of a decade, he ducked his head and cried.

"Hiccup?" Stoick called quietly, completely unsure of what to do, how to proceed. Hiccup shook his head because he hadn't been Hiccup in many long years. Stoick interpreted it as something else. With the urgency of a father who'd been mourning for too long and the gracelessness to match, he stepped forward and laid a hand on his son's head gently, drawing it to himself. Hiccup flinched away and stiffened. Stoick backed off, unsure. Hiccup's chest shook with another shuddering sob, but he swallowed it like the last so his throat only whimpered quietly. He curled his one leg onto the chair and dug his kneecap into his eyes, hiding, protecting. The crying continued silently, and Stoick could only watch.

He was twenty one, now. Nearly twenty two. He'd grown up tall, but he

was too skinny. He was all ribs and joints and scars, old scars and red scars and calluses so thick on his wrists and his neck it broke Stoick's heart twice over just to look at them. He had bruises, too, from the trip from the continent. His hair was shorn off in a jagged cut, so close to his scalp Stoick could see the shape of his skull. And then, there was his left leg, which was even less of a leg than when Stoick had last seen it, amputated mid-thigh with a very crude prosthetic to compensate.

So here was Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third. Here was the long-lost heir of the Hooligan tribe. The Dragon Rider, the Sea Dragon's Bane, the Hero of Berk himself. Broken, scarred, maimed, and crying like a child who couldn't help it. Cowering like a lamb for the slaughter. Hugging his one leg, bruised and knobby, hiding his face and his shorn-haired head in a quivering, terrified ball, because somehow, this was all he knew anymore.

Here was his son.

Stoick fell into a chair and watched helplessly as Hiccup shook, and keened, and hid. He wondered, with a heart so heavy Thor himself couldn't have lifted it, what the world had done to the man who'd once been his boy Hiccup.

## 2. A Mistake

He wished he could have said that the first night was the worst, but it was only the first of many. It is terrifying what can become normal through repetition, but only through taking the normal by its horrible horns and trying to make it healthy again do you realize how terrifying it can be.

And so, Stoick was terrified by his son. He was not sure that Hiccup would ever be healthy again. He wasn't even sure he would be Hiccup again. He would just be... This. Skin and bones and scars, curled up on the too-small bed sideways and twisted like he'd forgotten the concept of 'bed' entirely. The blanket was big enough to cover two of him, but he cowered beneath it, curled up like it was the size of a dish rag.

Stoick couldn't wake him. He couldn't even dream of it. It was noon, past lunch. Hiccup needed to eat - he was all bones. He needed food, especially after the long voyage from Scotland. But how do you wake the man who'd taken your boy and made him into a husk? How do you talk to a man who'd only spoken three words to you in eight years, two of which had been in a foreign tongue? How do you tell someone who'd been a slave for Odin knew how long, in hel only knew where, that he needed some fat on his bones, to eat up and sleep well? How do you even try to help mend such a man without breaking him all over again on accident?

How do you take a normal so terrible as this and make it healthy again? Was it even possible?

Gods, where were you supposed to start?

Berk seemed to understand the Chief's unspoken questions, and stayed well clear of the house that first day. Gobber came by, to see if Hiccup was awake, to see how Stoick was holding up. The chief had

developed a white complexion since he'd arrived back from Scotland, and it made Gobber realize how old Stoick looked. Sure, he was getting on a bit these days, butâ€¹ not like this. The smith didn't say anything, but made sure lunch was ready before he left.

The sun was nearly setting before Stoick noticed. He jumped when he saw it â€“ how could he be so stupid? It was Hiccup's prosthetic leg. A crude thing, a long, long peg that fit right up to his thigh where his amputation had cut through his femur. Hiccup had fallen asleep the night before in Stoick's chair, and the leg had been so cumbersome, Stoick had removed it before carrying his son upstairs. But if he didn't have it now, there was no way he could get downstairs. Stoick's stomach knotted in nervousness. Should heâ€¹?

He would check. He would be quiet â€“ it would just be a glance. He would peak in, drop off the leg, and leave. He wouldn't engage â€“ he wouldn't have to. Hiccup was still asleep, after all. He hadn't heard a thing all day, and these walls were hardly soundproof. If Hiccup had woken up, surely he would have heard. Quietly, fingers itching and legs asking him to stop every step of the way, Stoick crept upstairs and quietly, carefully nudged the door open. Hiccup's head whirled around to look at him, and Stoick jumped.

Hiccup was sitting on his bed, blanket wrapped around him, doing absolutely nothing. He seemed devoid of emotion on the inactivity, as if he'd been doing nothing but staring into space for hours (he probably had) and thought that it was expected of him. Stoick carefully came into the room. "Um," He said, and tried not to react when Hiccup's face flinched at the sudden noise, "I, erâ€¹ forgot this. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to, uhâ€¹ here." He laid the leg carefully next to Hiccup's bed. Hiccup looked at it, and looked up at his father. His adam's apple bobbed and he licked his lips uncertainly.

"Thank you," he rasped, and Stoick's heart froze. As he blinked back emotion, a memory flashed in his mind, of hearing his son speak his first word. He'd been a smiling infant when he'd hit that milestone, all green eyes and hope of approval. Now, twenty one years later, the same green eyes looked up at him emptily from sunken sockets, voice deep and cracking. There was also an accent there that bespoke so much more than the unused voice could, and Stoick felt like shrinking. He looked down for a moment and blinked.

"There'sâ€¹ there's lunch downstairs," He said, and glanced at the leg. Hiccup reached for it wordlessly.

Hiccup's movements were all so deliberate, direct. There was a feral edge to him, too. Stoick could tell he was trying to keep it under control, but it came through. It was in the quick movements before his conscious air could catch up, in the second after his eyes moved across the room. In the twitches at movement and the light in his eyes and said he was ready to fight at any moment. He scarfed down his food speedily, hunched over the bowl his lap, darting eyes subconsciously around the room, defensively. Stoick forgot to lift the spoon to his mouth as he watched his son. It was hard not to. His son. How wasâ€¹ this his son?\_

He got a few more bites down before he noticed something else. He'd seen it the day before, but he'd been so distracted by everything

else that he hadn't actually looked. It was on his right temple, in a puckered pink ring that wouldn't let his hair grow back. A nasty, blue-tinged 'S'.

It was out of his mouth before he could think better to bite his tongue: "What happened?"

Hiccup paused at first, confused. Stoick had stopped and seemed to be choking on his own words. Hiccup saw his eyes and raised a spindled hand up to his temple, fingertips brushing over the marred flesh in memory. He forgot it was there, more often than not. It had been so long. But nowâ€œ back here, back on Berk, by the smell of the sea, the pine-wooded village with its tar and soot and dragon scaleâ€œ his fingers brushed the scar again, and it stung like it had at the point of the knife that'd put it there. He did not look at Stoick.

"The first week," he said in that unusual accent. "Mmmâ€œ said it was a mistake." He took a hesitant bite and drew his bowl back into his lap. He stared into the broth and saw the sea of eight years ago. "â€œi" was't," he mumbled.

\* \* \*

><p>It'd been a mistake.<p>

It'll all be a big, fat, stupid mistake.

It'd been a mistake for Hiccup to go out with Toothless on that day at that time. It'd been a mistake when he dozed off in Toothless' lap and forgotten the time. It'd been a mistake when he watched the sunset from the beach for the fun of it, and it'd been a mistake when he didn't listen to what the waves brought to shore. It'd been a mistake that they let the boy see them. It'd been a mistake when he started running toward the village to raise the alarm. It'd been a mistake that he'd had a dragon with him. It'd been a mistake when the dragon wouldn't let them be. It'd been a mistake on everyone's part, but it was a mistake with a high price; an eight-year sentence.

They hadn't killed the night fury â€œ it was hard to kill something with iron scales when you only had a few crossbows for defense â€œ but they'd knocked it out with a solid blow to the head, and the boy had screamed so loud, they'd knocked him out too, for fear of him alerting the village past the woods. But they couldn't just leave him there. If he lived, he'd blab. If he died, his body would be found. Maybe they should drown him offshore, some said, leave him for the fish. Maybe they should bury him, let the worms do it. But then one of the more curious among them went through his clothes and found the chief's seal. The captain was livid.

Terrified might have been a better description. He may have been captain, but back home, he was only a boy prince, out on his first raid proving that he was worth his birthright. He and his small crew were supposed to take their low, sloping vessels over the mainland and through the fjords, to the Wilderwest where the Barbarians lived. They were not to steal, or kill, or plunder. It was forbidden. He wasn't allowed that honor yet. But he had to prove to his father that he had come this far, that he was capable.

He had, and he'd gotten himself into trouble by killing a chief's son. No, not killing. But what could he do? He could not let him

live, and he could not leave him dead. How do you not kill someone you need dead?

"What do you want us to do, master?" the oldest of the crewmembers practically spat at him. He was an advisor to his father the Jarl, here to make sure the young heir fulfilled his Journey's purpose, and did so honestly. The boy who wished he was a man glowered. He sweat nervously and tried to pretend it didn't tickle his brow more as his overseer's eyes bore into him. After a long moment and many unspoken curses, the boy glared at the unconscious Viking on the shore, and spat into the water.

"Take him," he said. The weight of amateur mistakes can, at times, outweigh all the luck of the deserving.

The boy-captain got the lecture of the century when they returned. They'd still had some sea to cover before they could turn back, and he'd treated Hiccup so poorly that by the time they arrived home, he was halfway starved and delirious with dehydration. They'd only treated him such because he was such a pain, the boy would insist. He tried to escape, he nearly did escape. They'd taken that fake leg of his and he still tried to escape. He yelled and kicked and bit and called to dragons in an odd tongue â€“ some good that did in the middle of the ocean â€“ and he generally made himself one massive pain in the royal arse.

The Jarl was not impressed. He was absolutely, red-faced, vein-bulgingly enraged. Son or no, Journey completed or no, the so-called heir got the lashing of his life. With words, with looks, with public humiliation, and finally with a resounding slap from the back of his father's ringed hand.

Hiccup had been dancing in and out of consciousness while son and father fought, hands bound behind him and kneeling at the end of the Jarl's hall. His head bobbed around his shoulders as if to indicate the precarious balancing act that faced the Jarl. Kill him, return him, war, silence, gambles, lies. What to do? Hiccup's head lolled to the left? What to do? It lolled to the right.

The Jarl was still arguing with his son when Hiccup's consciousness finally kicked in to stay. He frowned a moment, focusing. It was hard to understand these peopleâ€¦ they looked somewhat like Vikings. They had the helmets, the fur, even the language. But there were odd tones in their accents, odd smells on their clothes. They were too clean, their houses too big and too nice, the air too soft, no salt on their complexions. They were different. He had to focus to decipher their dialect.

"And what would you have me do?" The Jarl was yelling at his son from a raised dias, where a massive wooden throne loomed. "What would you suggest, oh my son?" He hissed, "Oh my heir? Tell me? Tell me what you would do!"

"Kill him!" The son burst in fear. "Justâ€¦ do away with him!"

"No!" The Jarl barked back, disgust on his face. "Stupid boy! If I kill him here on my land, I will have to bury his bones in my fields, wash his blood on my shores. His father and his tribe will come looking for him â€“ and while I lie through my teeth with red hands, his body will scream your crimes from my ground! The Barbarians are

ruthless " war with them is suicide, and it is exactly what you have brought me as tribute!" The heir "soon to be former heir-looked helpless. "You have infringed upon the conditions of your Journey. You have taken a prisoner and a hostage to me unrequested, you have invited the most ruthless tribes to declare war on us, and given me your father and your Jarl no ground with which to stop them. You have disgraced me, endangered all of us, and now, your suggestions make it even worse. I cannot kill him," the Jarl hissed, frowning hard. "And I cannot kill you, my own son, though it would do me better than if I were to kill him," he gestured to Hiccup, eyes not leaving his son, who was crying now, tears silently tracking down his face as he stared hard at the ground. No one in the hall said a word. The Jarl sighed. "Now get out of my sight before my sword hand overcomes your father's compassion."

As the former heir scurried away with his tail tucked between his legs, the advisor stepped up to the Jarl's side.

"Sir," He said quietly, "I believe I may have a solution," He glanced up at Hiccup. The look jolted Hiccup through his delirium and reminded him rather vividly that this was all about him. If he were any smarter, he would have felt afraid. He didn't. He wouldn't learn intelligence of fear for a while yet. The Jarl turned to his advisor, and the man said something that Hiccup did not understand. Well, true enough, he understood the words, but he did not know what they actually meant.

"Mark him." The look that the Jarl sent him would haunt Hiccup's memories in months to come, though in the moment he didn't think twice about it. After not even two breaths of consideration, the Jarl nodded.

"Do it," he said, as if washing his hands of some foul stench, "And then get him off my lands, off my hands, off my people's worries."

"Do you have any buyers in town, milord, or should I send him in a convoy to-"

"I don't care," The Jarl snapped, his frayed nerves sparking dangerously. He reeled for a moment, fighting for control over his anger and sudden stress. "But I never want to see or hear of him again. He was never here. My son never touched him. I never saw him. And as far as we're concerned, the Hooligans and their isle of Berk don't exist at all."

The advisor nodded in an administrative way. "Of course, my lord." He turned sharp, hawkish eyes on Hiccup, who saw him sideways as his head continued to loll without his asking. The man glanced at the guard posted behind Hiccup. "Bring me ink," He said. The guard nodded and left. Then, to Hiccup's rather delayed alarm, the man brought out a dagger. He stepped right up to Hiccup and seized a fistful of his hair. He grabbed a fistful just at his right temple, and sawed off a huge swatch without even a blink of hesitation. Just a few moments later, the guard returned with a bottle of blue ink. The advisor gestured with his dagger to Hiccup. "Hold him down," He said business-like, and knelt down and rolled up his sleeves as the guard grabbed Hiccup's shoulder and guided him to the ground so his left ear pressed against the wood floor.

Hiccup's heart was beating a frantic beat against his ribs, his lungs trying to keep up. He wasn't sure what they'd meant when they spoke of him, and he didn't know what was happening. But he did know for absolute certain that nothing good came of it when you were pinned down with your neck out and the man above you held a sharp knife. But they weren't going to kill him, were they? They'd brought ink. But for what? You didn't slit throats with ink, Hiccup reasoned. Whatever they planned to do, he wouldn't die, would he?

He wouldn't die, not then. But at times, when it really wants to be, reality can deal a crueler hand than death.

The advisor's clammy hands on his face made Hiccup's lip curl, but he had mere seconds to leave it that way before the knife was at his temple, and he screamed. The face was a sensitive piece of work, and his was being torn apart. Hiccup thrashed and twisted helplessly against the unexpected pain, screaming against the solid arms of the guard and the hand of the unaffected knifeman who was carving into his flesh. He opened his eyes and one point and was blinded by his own blood dripping into his eye from his new wound. The blood tickled his nose as it dripped further down. With his left eye, he watched in sideways, tear-filled horror as the man uncorked the ink bottle and dipped a finger into it. The hand reached back for his face.

Oh, he'd thought it'd been fire the first time. Now, he knew what poison felt like when set ablaze. It was hel, and Thor himself couldn't have kept him from screaming. He thrashed, helpless, wondering what on earth they were trying to do to him. He was still dehydrated, and as the blood and ink flowed mingled down his face, he grew still.

He would wake up many hours later, in shackles, in a wooden cell, with a plate of moldy bread and bowl of water. He'd peer into the water and see his own reflection. A massive bald gap glared at him from where the men had cut off his hair, and just beneath it was their devilish artwork. Carved in angry, inflamed red lines and filled with an unnatural inky blue, was a crude circle filled with an unmistakable 'S'.—

Hiccup felt his heart sink to the bottom of the deepest ocean. He'd seen it before, on the faces of others, the pitied stock of lesser tribes.

It was called the Slavemark, and it mean that his life was forfeit, forever.

He hadn't started breathing again when the ground beneath him lurched forward, and he heard the clopping of hooves outside his cell. Except it wasn't a cell; it was a cart. He was being moved. He looked around frantically, down at his stumped leg, his shackled wrists. He saw a fleck of light by his arm and knelt, peering out between the planks of wood around him and watched the prosperous village of the mainland Jarl, whoever he was, fade into the distance.

"Mark him," they'd said. They'd marked him, all right. They'd chained him. They'd maimed him all over again and now they were shipping him off to Odin knew where. They had ruined his life â€" to a degree that no one could yet imagine.

Hiccup would never learn their names, nor where they lived. He would

carry their 'solution' to their mistake to his deathbed. He realized the permanence of it that first day as his fingertips brushed sore flesh for the first time. He did not realize that in due time, he would forget the pain of the Slavemark in favor of pains far worse. It stung against the dirt on his fingers.

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><p>A moment passed and Hiccup blinked into the broth of his stew. He hadn't realized he'd been staring at it for so long. Something tickled his nose, and when he reached for it he half expected it to be ink-mixed blood. It was a tear. He pretended not to have touched it. "It's old," he muttered, knowing Stoick was staring at him and not wanting to look back up at him, "Justâ€œ a mistake," he said, and continued eating like a hunchback.<p>

Stoick stared, and imagined, filling in the blanks. Would he ever hear all of it? Even some of it? He didn't know. He didn't want to ask.

A mistake, Hiccup had said. All of it, a mistake. Did he really believe that?

Stoick wondered what he should do next, how he should respond. He wondered, in the dark of his mind, if he should believe Hiccup's lie, too, if it was easier that way. Not knowing what else there was to do, he spooned more stew into his mouth.

### 3. Oska

The next week went unsettlingly well.

Hiccup was taking everything in with hardly a flinch. He'd been broken the day he'd come ashore, weak and teary. But within a matter of days, it was as if a switch had been flipped, and he was fine. Fine. They weren't sure what 'fine' meant, but it was stable and didn't change. Hiccup didn't smile much, and spoke even less. But he could look you in the eye, he would eat and sleep like a normal person should (more or less). He never left the Haddock house, but people came to visit and he seemed to understand what they said, even if he didn't always answer.

But it 'fine' was odd. It was too fine. It was too consistent. It was wooden, fake. Not everyone caught the nuances, but Stoick did. Every once in a while, the boy would slip, and all at once, he would look absolutely terrified of everything. He never said anything during these episodes, never explained why he was afraid or even made a sound. Instead, his hand would shoot up to his neck and finger at his collar, rub the old scars from the metal band he'd worn there for years. He would finger something at his chest, some token that hung about his neck on a bit of twine. He'd turn it and rub it and turn it again, sometimes clutching it. Eventually, his terror would fade, and that emotionless, unchanging 'fine' mask would materialize again.

Stoick wondered if one was real, and the other was not. He wondered if the terror was waiting to come back in force, if that was the real Hiccup waiting to escape from the 'fine' Hiccup. It made his gut twist thinking about it. Was reality, in this case, actually more

important than 'fine'?

Did Stoick want real? Did he want to have to deal with his own son's horror? Or was it better to lie to himself and pretend that Hiccup was fine, if it meant no one had to deal with the terrified man beneath? Hiccup asserted the 'fine'ness on himself, anyway. If Hiccup had a reason to do it, wellâ€| surely that wasâ€| fine. But something about that idea wormed into his gut and sat so wrongly against his heart that, despite how terrible and awkward he felt about it, Stoick had to prod the bear.

He didn't know how to be subtle. "Soâ€| what happened?" He asked one quiet afternoon. It was so stupid and blunt that he flinched at his own words. Stoick the Vast was a man of action, not a man of tact. He wished he were otherwise, for Hiccup's sake.

Hiccup had been fiddling restlessly with pencil and paper, and now his hands froze where they worked. He did not look at Stoick. He did not turn or gasp, or say anything. He only froze in what he was doing, and did not move. Stoick coughed awkwardly.

"I-I'm sorry, Hiccup," Stoick rebounded, voice cracking from the effort of trying to be soft. "I justâ€| we'veâ€| we've missed you," because he couldn't explain that they'd mourned him for eight years, "And I wonderedâ€| what happened. After you got that, ehm," Stoick gestured vaguely at his forehead, looking at Hiccup's slavemark.

Hiccup was shaking his head softly. He did not look up, choosing instead to look intently at the pencil he was holding. Stoick's pride fell a bit and he faltered even more.

"Of course, I know you've, umâ€| that isâ€| not reallyâ€| gotten used to being back, afterâ€|" Hiccup was shaking his head even harder now, and when Stoick drew breath to speak again, Hiccup's hand shot up frantically to the thing around his neck, fingers shaking clumsily, shoulders and neck growing tense. Stoick couldn't see his eyes, but he knew the terrified Hiccup had come out again, blind to whatever Stoick did next.

Stoick let out his breath as a sigh. He watched his son for a moment, feeling like the worst father in the world. He told himself so over and over, turning away and leaving Hiccup alone.

Hiccup remained frozen where he was, frantically squeezing the hard, dirty pendent that hung around his neck, trying to make it cut into his fingers, imprint its texture onto his skin, anything to make the dream-memory stay out of his sight. It was no use. He was right next to the fire, but his skin took hold of the memory first. Before everything else, the memories of his first master began with the feeling of cold.

\* \* \*

><p>It hadn't been cold at the market where they'd sold him. It was a port city, cool and muggy and damp so that when it wasn't raining it felt like it should, and when it was raining it felt like it would never end. After a week isolated in a box on the bumpy road, he thought he'd been alone. When they opened his cell at the port and dragged his dirty, bruised body out of the cart, he found that he

wasn't alone. Not alone at all. As they shoved his stump into his prosthetic which had definitely seen better days he took in his surroundings.<p>

Dozens of slaves shuffled about, the whites of their eyes stark against dirty skin. They peered at him, eyes saying nothing. Their handlers held them by leashes attached to their shackles, tugging them this way and that with varying degrees of care. Hiccup only had time to think about how cruel it was until a clink and a weight on his wrists told him that his captors had outfitted him with similar chains. He glared at them when they tugged.

They milled about the markets aimlessly for a while, dragging him behind them. Passers-by looked at his leg in confusion, repressing laughter at how small he was. Some mothers cringed when they saw how fresh his slavemark was and hugged their children closer. Eventually, the slaveholders began to congregate at a stage set up in the center of the bay. Hiccup watched as slaves of all ages, genders, and sizes passed him by. There were women shorter than he was, and men as tall as his father. There were people with dark skin and faces like he'd never seen before, and not everyone spoke in Norse.

When they got him on the stage, one of his captors took out a knife and cut off his tunic. He couldn't help it when he yelped, half because the knife went so close to his skin and half because he'd liked that tunic. They painted big woad-blue runes on his bare chest just as the other slaveholders did with their wares, and hooked his chain leash to a loop drilled into the wood at his feet. There, they left him for the crowd to stare at.

He glanced at the others similarly bound on either side of him. Shackled, bound, painted and priced, slavemarks shining in the overcast sunlight. He wasn't a person anymore. He was a thing, Hiccup realized. It made him angrier than he could say.

He shifted on his wobbly prosthetic foot, and the man next to him glanced at him, first at his leg and then at his tattooed forehead. He was a tall, muscled man with dark skin (Hiccup had heard others call him Africkan, whatever that meant) and although he could not speak to Hiccup in a language he would understand, his eyes communicated sympathy. Hiccup ignored it and glared at the crowd below.

The bidding started. It was a long, boring time up there on the stage. They started on the opposite end of the stage and worked toward him. After a short time of auction, each slave would be unhooked from his place and handed over to the highest bidder, who would pay the sellers and either leave with his prize or wait to buy more. Even through the grey cloudcover, Hiccup could feel his shoulders burning in the sun. He'd have even more freckles tomorrow, he thought.

The boredom gave way to a niggling sort of fear. As each slave was purchased and ushered away, the auction grew closer to Hiccup where he could watch the action. Some masters looked rich, calm and civilized as they examined their new slaves' health and passed them on to some insubordinate, who dealt with the newcomers mechanically, but decently. Then, there were others. Men who didn't look like they should possess enough money for a slave, but waved it in the air anyway, bidding and buying. Those masters grabbed their slaves

roughly, and shoved them into line with their convoys. They bought many women, and some young boys. Their new slaves looked either terrified, or furious. Hiccup felt both. He wondered how well he could fight, if he had to. The Africkan man beside him was bought by a man who Hiccup guessed was a merchant. The buyer seemed decent enough, but chains were still chains.

Now it was on to him.

The crowd shifted a bit when the auctioneer came up to him and grabbed his shoulder, pushing him forward for them to see. His leg was a point of attention, apparently. He could barely understand the auctioneer's Norse because he spoke quickly and with an accent, but he caught snippets:

"\_Newâ€|. Barbarian childâ€|. Northmanâ€|. Small, but spiritedâ€| good house slaveâ€|. Used to the cold, [laughter]â€|. Hear three denara?... five, five, hear six?" \_and so on.

He watched the hands flash in the air and his stomach clenched. Good gods, there they were, the scum-feeders, the men who'd already bought so many women and boys that Hiccup thought they would have run out of money by now. Some were looking at him, and some were bidding. He could see his own blue-painted chest heaving in nervousness, but he couldn't stop it or hide his fear. He could fight them, couldn't he? He'd used his own leg as a weapon before, he could do it again. Astrid hadn't been able to turn him into a warrior, but he'd never ignored her lessons. He could put up a fight if he needed to, he could make them regret it. Couldn't he? Surelyâ€|

Another hand went up, this one didn't look like a lowlife. Not really. Not a king, or a merchantâ€| Hiccup wasn't sure what to make of him. But he put up a bidding hand, looking a bit bored as he did so, and Hiccup couldn't believe himself when he actually began rooting for this man. Gods, how quickly you could fall, one day flying your dragon careless across the sky, the next praying to every gods that this particular man would buy you at the slave market?

The man won, thank Odin. Hiccup had been right when he thought that the lowlifes were running out of money. No one wanted to pay that much for a one-legged spindle, except for whoever this idiot man was. They unchained Hiccup from the stage and pulled him over to his buyer. Up close, Hiccup saw that he might've been a Viking, too. He had the bones for it. But something about him was different, more foreign. More easternly than Hiccup could call familiar.

"You speak Norse, I'm assuming?" the man asked with a heavy accent. Yup, eastern.

Hiccup had to swallow around a dry tongue before he said, "Yes,"

"Is that the only language you speak?"

"Yes."

"Hmm," the man hummed, a touch disappointed, "just as well your masters sold you cheap. Come on, then." He took up Hiccup's leash and pulled gently. Hiccup scurried along, occasionally tripping on a cobbled stone with his leg, but he never fell. The man cast a

not-quite-impressed look his way. "What is your name?" He asked.

"Hiccup," Hiccup told him, and felt like he was saying too much. The man looked back at him, and he would have laughed if he wasn't taken so off guard.

"Hiccup? No," He said, smiling in a good-natured but not friendly way, "No, your name will be Oska."

Hiccup thinned his lips, unable to reply. It was a different dialect, but he understood. Twig. His name would be Twig. Oska. Life just got better and better, didn't it?

He was silent as his new master dragged him along, not sure if he could be angry when he'd escaped a worse fate. He was angry anyway. They'd taken everything else away from him, why not his name, too?

\* \* \*

><p>For weeks, Hiccup only knew his new master as 'master' or at times, 'my lord'. They travelled for quite a while across country â€“ Hiccup wasn't exactly sure how many days it took â€“ to reach the man's home. Well, 'home' was a bit of an understatement. It was a fortress, a small city in and of itself, and this man was the ruler. Most of his insubordinates were slaves or serfs, although a select few of them were about the same status as he was.</p>

It was cold here. It was already summer, or at least, Hiccup remembered it being midsummer when he was still on Berk. But snow was all around him now, white and gleaming and wet where it flecked against his legs. Happily, whether for kindness or necessity, his new master had bought him new, thick clothes, saying that even northmen couldn't survive without them. Hiccup hadn't read into that explanation at the time, too happy to have soft, new clothes on his back. But he learned quickly.

He was a houseslave for the first several months. He fetched water, he made food, he brought food in for dinner and cleaned up afterward. He carried messages to and fro, made beds and generally did chores all day until he had blisters covering his hands and dust all in his hair. He hurt, but it could be worse, he tried to tell himself. It could always be worse.

And he hoped. He knew he'd never last a day on his own if he tried to escape â€“ this place was isolated at best â€“ but he made a nightly ritual of going up on the roof when he knew even the guards would be asleep, and he would call for help.

He couldn't scream loudly, but he would mimick a night fury's call as loud as he dared. It would echo across the sky, and he would hope. It had never failed before. Tail or no, Toothless would find him. His father would find him. Astrid would find him. He would go home. He always had before. He would find his way back again. Toothless would always come for him.

Time passed. He learned his master's real name â€“ Alvar. Most of the slaves simply called him 'the master' or, in private, 'the beard'. He did have a formidable beard â€“ all black and smoothly groomed, darker than tar and big enough to keep him warm in addition to all

those furs. Hiccup never called him that, not at first.

Hiccup's chest clenched the day he realized that he'd begun speaking in an accent. He deliberately called to mind his father's voice, and began mimicking it. He continued to call for Toothless every night, but he no longer felt the same rush of hope. He knew the guards saw him, sometimes. They never asked why he did it.

The other slaves were amiable to him at first, but over time, things grew worse. Alvar was losing money, or so the rumor went. Some slaves were sold, some were hurt on the job and couldn't work. One died. He'd been the oldest. Alvar couldn't afford to buy any more, so their workloads increased. Hiccup became a resentment among the staff, because of his leg, because he was small, because the Beard favored him because he was young.

The first time the other slaves beat him, Hiccup hid the bruises. They told him he'd keep hiding them if he knew what was good for him. They were angry. Not always with him, but he was convenient and weak, an outlet. He kept to himself as much as he could.

He kept calling for Toothless, even as the air grew colder. He did not feel hope, now, but he kept calling anyway.

Winter was coming in full when Alvar moved him to the outdoor team. He had to, he needed more help out there, and he couldn't bring himself to move women outside in the cold. Hiccup didn't dare say anything about the women who were strong and mean enough to beat him on a biweekly basis.

Winter in this snowy place was cold. Before now, Hiccup would've thought that it would have gone without saying, but now he couldn't say it enough, or in the right way to convey the idea. It was cold. It was freezing. It was so cold that you forgot about being cold, but still felt cold anyway. It was cold enough to give you blisters from breathing. There were ways to survive, to keep yourself from getting frostbite and worse, but it was cold. He hadn't felt his toes in months. Berk had been an island, rugged and cold but buffered by the seas. He was inland, now, and the frost giants had ruled here for centuries.

Out in the yard, he tended the thick-furred horses and shoveled stables. He stirred the water reservoirs for hours to make sure they didn't freeze. He shoveled snow and chopped wood and hauled cargo when he was strong enough. Then, he went back inside every night and curled up in a drafty bed loft with half a dozen other men, hoping they wouldn't attack him. His leg cramped. His prosthetic was warped from the cold and pinched him. He'd grown a massive blister on his stump but he was so numb he hardly ever felt it. It began to turn into a sore, and Hiccup prayed to every god he knew that it wouldn't grow worse. He convinced the house nurse to give him bandages and salve and not speak of it to the master. He tried to repair his leg and keep it from making it worse, and it worked, sometimes. He no long climbed to the roof. He stood by an abandoned window and called very quietly into the night to make himself feel better, until his face was too cold or until someone cursed at him to close the shutters.

He was so much skinnier than he'd been. His eyes were darker, his hair longer. When they told him winter was beginning to fade (was it

really?) he realized he'd been here for half a year. His clothes were worn and no longer offered the warmth they once had. If he hadn't been growing skinnier as he grew taller, he would've noticed that they were getting too small, too.

In the spring (whatever that meant, here, it was still colder than ice) Alvar decided that he wanted to go on a hunt. There were massive elk in this country, apparently, and they were running low on food after the winter. Hiccup was drafted into the hunting party along with all the other outdoor slaves, and he only prayed he and his leg would survive until they got back.

"Oksa, you're small," Alvar whispered, beckoning Hiccup up beside his horse, "go through that bush and see if there is anything in this field. My ears tell me there is game here."

Hiccup nodded stiffly and obeyed, going on mitten hands and knees to creep through the bushes. There was game there â€“ two massive elk, one a buck with antlers so big Hiccup's eyes bulged. He scurried backwards out of his hiding place and nodded at his master.

"Two," he said quietly, brushing off his hands, "one of them must be their chief, he's so big."

Alvar laughed at the idea, and motioned quietly to his hunting companions, who held cocked crossbows at their shoulders. They dismounted and shuffled through the snow around their bushy cover. Alvar dismounted last, holding a massive bow in his left hand. "Wait here," he told Hiccup and the other slaves. He did take one with him, the biggest one who carried extra weapons. Hiccup and the others watched through gaps in the foliage.

"Oh, look at him, he'll feed us for months," one said.

"Don't dare scare him away, Oksa," one said, kidding. It still hurt a bit.

"That fur looks warm,"

"Nothing is warm," the other grumbled.

Hiccup said nothing. His heart was racing in anticipation, mouth drooling at the thought of fresh meat, or rather, meat scraps that he would get in whatever stew the cooks made for them. He never shivered in the cold now, but shivered instead of anticipation.

And then he stopped.

Something wasn't right. There was something else. The elk had frozen in their spots, ears twitching. Alvar and his men ducked, assuming it was for them, but Hiccup could see their heads cocked in a different direction. The forest was already quiet in the cold, but now it seemed even more so. If Hiccup listened very, very carefully, he could almost hear something trying not to break that quiet.

Just as Alvar drew back his bow, the south side of the field exploded. In a shower of snow, a massive dragon erupted into the clearing and grabbed the smaller of the elk in his mouth and swallowed it in two huge, bloody bites. The bigger elk screamed and ran away. Around him, the other slaves scattered, screaming. Alvar

and his men ducked behind a snowbank, but Alvar had already drawn his bow, and now the arrow careened into the dragon's hide. It's snowy white head, stained with red elk blood, snapped toward where the men hid, and Hiccup's heart stopped for a split second.

Alvar was a distant master. He didn't notice that Hiccup was underfed, or beaten, and he didn't even ask if he needed anything for the cold. But Hiccup knew that if he died, his world would come crashing down and he would die. So what he did next was both selfless and completely selfish. He didn't remember getting up and running, but there was, in the middle of the field, in front of the dragon.

"Stop!" He yelled at it, voice cracking. It looked at him, but didn't stop. "Stop!" he yelled again, this time growling like he remembered doing with Toothless. The dragon froze. Hiccup's brain reeled. He'd learned to mimick Toothless and the other dragons over the years, until they'd developed a rudimentary communication style. It'd been fun, a game. Now, he hoped it had actually meant something. "Stop! Do not!" he hesitated. He had a limited vocabulary, if you could call growls and gravelly shouts a vocabulary. "Umâ€| L-leave it!"

The dragon was looking at him, fixated. It very deliberately licked the blood off its maw and peered at him, growling an inquisitory noise at him. He didn't understand exactly what the dragon asked, but he knew it was about him.

"F-friend," Hiccup said, jerkily, "Notâ€| not harm. Justâ€| leave it." He said. He did not break eye contact with the dragon, but he could hear the other men behind him, cursing and asking what he was doing, yelling at him to run. "Youâ€| eat. Weâ€| we leave. Not hurt. Not eat. Leave it," He repeated, slowly backing away, hands open and to his sides. The dragon watched him, transfixed in fascination. He growled another question, tilting his predatory eyes at the small human beneath him. Hiccup swallowed, unable to decipher the dragon completely. "Youâ€| notâ€| not eat me," he said calmly, voice shaking. "Notâ€| eat. Friend. Iâ€| we leave." He hadn't ever actually thought these growls meant anything to anyone besides him and the Berk dragons, but it gave this dragon pause and Hiccup was willing to take the chance.

"Oksa, get away from it!" Alvar yelled in panic. The dragon's head shot up. Hiccup waved at it.

"Friend! Friend!" he yelled, "Leave it â€" we leave now. Now!" He jogged backwards as the dragon growled a low, bewildered warning at him. Hiccup scrabbled and grabbed Alvar's cloak.

"Run," He told his master, "he'll leave us, but we have to go now."

"Oska, how the hell\_,"

"Run, please!" Hiccup pleaded.

They ran. They had only taken down small game that day, but when they returned to the house, there was a celebration that they'd escaped with their lives. Hiccup, or rather, Oska was hailed as a hero. Alvar asked him how he spoke with dragons. Hiccup wasn't sure he would call

it speaking because he barely knew what he said and could not understand dragons' speech well, but he did not say so.

"We had to deal with dragons back home," Hiccup said vaguely. Alvar scoffed and looked at him with unusual respect.

Life returned to normal. The ice slowly thawed. But despite the spring and despite Hiccup's new reputation, things did not improve all that much. Hiccup still slept in the cold. He still worked outside in the snow, now slushy and wet. The beatings decreased, but Hiccup's leg still waxed and waned between callus, blisters, and sores, surrounded by prayers against infection â€“ he still refused to mention it to anyone. Alvar was still losing money, and slaves. Hiccup remained. Alvar began looking at him occasionally, hungrily. Hiccup wasn't sure why. He couldn't ask.

Sometimes, Alvar would take Hiccup out on hunting parties under the pretense of needing help and see if he could get him to interact with dragons. It was usually just small forest dragons (thank Thor) and they were almost too startled to stick around to talk. He did talk with them, and slowly began to understand them more, like he had Toothless. He was able to tell Alvar what they were hunting, where they'd seen game. Alvar would bellow in glee. He'd never seen such a talent. Hiccup didn't have the heart to tell him he barely knew what he was doing.

He started calling to Toothless again, at night. As ever, nothing came of it. But they would come, he told himself in a mantra, they always came. They had to come.

He'd been there, growing numb and sore and blistered for nearly two full years. Tall and gangly, with bones for muscles but not enough food to grow them, he lived up to the name of Oksa very well. He was only kept for his stubborn ability to survive and his way with dragons, who helped him sniff out prey in the sparse woods.

But then, the second summer came. Game was everywhere. Alvar was poor. Hiccup was not as strong as the other slaves. He tripped. His leg, which was growing too short for him, was his weakness. Dragons retreated deeper into the woods and Hiccup had no use for his talent here. The hungry look in Alvar's eyes returned.

He had no warning when Alvar's men woke him up before dawn and brought him outside to the horses. They threw a pack at his feet and told him to carry it. They rode on the roads this time, not in the woods. Alvar refused to look at Oksa. It was two days into their trek before they put the shackles on Hiccup. He panicked, and looked at Alvar for some sort of answer. The short tufts of hair that grew above his right brow ticked his face. Alvar did not react. He did not turn around.

A day later, they met a group on the road. It was an arranged meeting, Hiccup had to guess. The leader shook hands with Alvar, and handed him a massive bag that jingled when Alvar took it and weighed it. He nodded, and gestured to his men. One of them unhitched Hiccup's chain leash from where it'd been tethered to a horse, and handed it to the man who'd paid. The man smiled dirtily, and Hiccup's body froze in sudden panick. No. No, this couldn't be happening. He shot his head around to look at his master.

"Master?" He asked, hesitantly. Alvar turned and walked away. "A-Alvar!" He demanded, but the lord did not answer. He had his head ducked in shame, brow angry. He grabbed his horse roughly, kneading the sack of silver in his hand. He had no choice, he told himself. "Alvar!" Hiccup shouted this time, angry. Alvar disappeared without looking back. Hiccup would never see him again.

"Oska," the rough man holding the chains grated, and Hiccup turned to glare at him. "They breed strange creatures up north," He said in poor Norse, and spat on the ground. He glanced Hiccup up and down. "Let us see your talents, then," he hissed, and grabbed Hiccup's face in one hand. The other men around them laughed as he dragged Hiccup by the jaw toward one of the carts they took with them. He let go and Hiccup staggered in front of a cart with a metal crate in the back.

A baby Monstrous Nightmare cowered behind the bars. It's neck sported a stitched up scar, and when it opened its mouth, Hiccup understood why. They'd cut out its flame ducts. It couldn't spit fire. He was so shocked, his anger didn't have time to mature.

"So speak to it!" the man laughed, and elbowed Hiccup in the spine. He hissed in pain and looked back at the dragon. "Make it scream!"

Hiccup looked at the small dragon with tears welling up, from the pain in his back and from looking at the helpless creature. "I'm sorry," he hissed quietly. The dragon roared back at him, voice squeaking from its injury." The men around him cheered, and two hands fell on Hiccup's shoulders to drag him away and into the convoy, which began moving again. They couldn't understand what the dragonling said, but Hiccup had begun to learn enough of this new language to pick it up through the raucous laughter of the mob.

"Me die. Just... me let me die," it squeaked. Hiccup didn't break eye contact with the youth dragon until the men crowded in and blocked it from his sight. His hip ached as his leg limped, and his heart raced in fear. He missed the cold, the hard floor, the salve the nurse snuck to him, he missed his hopeless crying on the roof. It felt almost like home, now. The ground beneath him was rocky, and around him, the men began speaking in a sharp, unknown tongue that Hiccup had never heard before. He stared ahead into nothing, frozen in empty fear.

Good gods, where was he going?

\* \* \*

><p>His hand was not quite bleeding when he finally wrestled his mind into submission. When he looked around, he realized that he was in the middle of the room, his father's house, on Berk. An open notebook and a pencil lie in front of him. He was rocking back and forth. He stopped, and looked down. He heard rather than saw Stoick turn to look at him, and he wondered how long he'd been there rocking himself on the floor. He blushed red in embarrassment, and stood, still looking at the ground. He needed cold. He needed air. He needed something hard and real and not, <em>not</em> anything that came after the cold.

He went outside and sat, and crooned to himself the night fury call that no one ever answered. Berk watched him quietly from their windows and their walking paths. Gobber growled at those he caught staring, and tried to hide the fact that he was watching, too. From a doorway slightly down the hill, a blond-braided woman stared, transfixed in something like horror. Her husband opened the door behind her, and she jumped.

"Astrid, do you think you could—" he froze when he saw her, and followed her gaze up to the Haddock's porch.

"Yes, um, what?" she turned away, breathing in deeply to make herself forget, "I'll just— yeah," she hurried away, disturbed. Her husband still watched the man up on the porch as he rocked, and looked down, and rubbed his hands over wood and stone, his too-long prosthetic knocking against the flagstones.

It wasn't right. But what could he do? He clenched his jaw, not sure what to feel.

He turned away and went to help his wife with the cleaning, helping her ignore the past that had come back to haunt them.

#### 4. Scars

\*\*A/N: \*\*It's been a very long time since I've updated this. Sorry guys!

\* \* \*

><p>It was Gobber's idea to start Hiccup back at the forge. It would give him something to do, he insisted, give him something to keep his hands busy and his mind occupied. Stoick protested at first, saying that he hadn't enough strength for it, but Gobber shut him up by reminding him that Hiccup wouldn't get any strength back unless he worked for it. Better than staring out into nothing, or spending his time hiding food like he would starve. In the back of his mind, Gobber hoped that it would help Hiccup remember Berk and his earlier life here. He knew as well as anyone with half a brain that Hiccup would never be that boy again, but part of him hoped that he would at least <em>remember</em>, that it would be some small comfort.

"Right, and you pull this here to heat the flame," Gobber yanked on the long bellows, and the embers glowed. For all his jumpiness around people, fire did not seem to faze Hiccup. He nodded subtly, so Gobber moved on. "And this is where all the tools are—" hammers, prongs, tongs, files, the lot. Try to keep them in their places when you're done with them. This anvil will be yours for the usin'. Mine's that fine one over there. You can start off on these fire hooks. They're damn near impossible to mess up, so don't worry too much about the shape. They just need to tend a fire without breaking or burning anyone, mind. Do you need me to show you how?" Gobber looked at Hiccup. Hiccup, looking at the lump of iron on the anvil rather than at Gobber, shook his head. "Right," the smith said, trying to hide how Hiccup's cold shoulder hurt him, "Hop to it, then. No rush."

Hiccup hammered at the iron with rusty skill. It was obvious to anyone that he had done this before, but it took him a level of

concentration that Gobber hadn't had to bother with in years. Hiccup looked almost sleepy in the way he moved about the smithy, finding tools and metal bits as he needed them. Amid the sluggishness, his eyes weren't sleepy. His eyes' stare on the anvil was like the hand of a drowning man thrust through the water to hold onto a raft. The sensory of his work, the smell, the look, the sounds, it was holding him in place. He couldn't remember his former life consciously, but deep, deep down in the lost memories of his childhood, his subconscious told him that this was a place where he could relax.

It was the first time he'd tried to relax in a long time. His shoulders remained tense.

They had a customer appear at the window. Gobber saw her first. "Ah, hullo Astrid. What can I do for you today?"

"I think you have Snotlout's sword ready from yesterday?"

"Ah yes, it's just here."

"Great. While I'm here, would you mind taking a look at the-"

Hiccup had turned around to set another fire poker in the pile of those he'd finished. He saw Astrid, and felt his eyes involuntarily widen, just slightly. Astrid's widened considerably.

"Ahh," Gobber said awkwardly, gesturing toward Hiccup. "Astrid, you remember Hiccup," he said slowly, weirdly. Remember didn't feel right here on Berk, considering they'd all thought he was dead for eight years.

Hiccup stood there waiting to be told to do something, and Astrid gaped.

"Um," She said, her expression going very sad until she realized that Hiccup did not look bothered by it. "Um. Yes." She said, not knowing how else to react. How could she react, with him staring at her like that?

Gobber was about to say something, but a man appeared at the second window of the forge. "D-ah, Hiccup, could you...?" He waved at Astrid. "The sword she wants is just there," He pointed at a rack of many swords and went to see to his customer.

Hiccup looked over at the swords and picked through them, trying to deduce which one she would want.

"It's the one with the green leather," she offered awkwardly, and he nodded, picking out the right one. He felt mildly impressed by the quality of the blade. He went over to her and handed the sword across the window. She took it while staring at him, at his tattoo, his scars, his hair. Her face twitched like she wanted to say many different things and didn't know which thing ought to go first. Hiccup clenched his jaw awkwardly, trying to find words himself. She interpreted it as an emotional hurdle. In reality, he was trying to remember which language he ought to use. He remembered Astrid, vaguely. He remembered that he had liked her a great deal. But now, he could not seem to muster more than an internal sadness.

"Do you need anything else?" He asked. The thick accent he used made

her frown.

She needed her axe sharpened. "No, that's it."

He nodded and turned back to his fire pokers. She watched him for too long before leaving. Gobber saw her go, and looked back to where Hiccup heated iron on the coals. He sighed, unable to help himself when he thought of all the things that could have been.

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><p>After Astrid, Gobber had <em>thought <em>things would go swimmingly for the rest of the day. Unfortunately, in the early afternoon, Hiccup hit a coal and set his shirt on fire. This was hardly uncommon in the forge, but when patting at it didn't help, Gobber took his always-on-hand fire bucket and doused him. It put out the fire, but Hiccup was soaked. Gobber gave an apologetic laugh.

"Sorry, lad," He said, and felt his heart soar when Hiccup's face gave a twitch that could almost hint at a smile, "I've some more shirts back here, one ought to fit you well enough." He led Hiccup into the back room, unsure if he would recognize it from its days as his own work station. It looked a good deal different than it once had. If Hiccup remembered the room at all, it was little more than a flicker in his memory. Gobber dug through a bin of linens, towels, and clothing to find a clean tunic. "Ah, here we are," He yanked out a blue piece with his hook. "Get changed and carry on. No harm done." He gave Hiccup a smile and left.

He came back a short moment later to ask what the boy wanted for lunch. He forgot about lunch as soon as he saw him.

Hiccup was standing with his back to Gobber, using a towel to dry himself off before putting on his dry clothes. His skin was bare. All over his back, there were scars. Welts. Jagged lumps where broken ribs hadn't healed back properly. Some of them were stretched and puckered from age â€“ some were pink. Some were still swollen and bright red. They were mostly on his back, but some showed just corners, edges peaking from beneath his trousers, on the backs of his arms. When Hiccup reached up to dry his hair, Gobber even spotted a scar that disappeared into Hiccup's hairline.

Pure, righteous anger overtook him. I didn't give him time to check his words before he spoke.

"What in the name of Thor?" Hiccup jumped, having not heard the other man come in. He turned to look at Gobber, and there were scars on his front, too, but nothing compared to his back. "What happened?" Gobber demanded. He was angry â€“ not at Hiccup, but Hiccup had lost the ability to differentiate many years ago.

"I was drying off," he muttered defensively. Gobber shook his head in a 'not that' sort of way that Hiccup couldn't read, and stepped toward the boy. He was so angry for Hiccup, so enraged by the sight of the scars that he did not notice when Hiccup flinched.

"What \_happened?" \_He asked again, pointing at the scars with his hook, grabbing Hiccup's arm with his hand. Hiccup had gone wide-eyed and stiff, silent as he stared at the floor. Gobber was busy looking

at his back. He turned Hiccup by the shoulder to see better. "Hiccup, who did this to you?" He asked angrily. Hiccup remained frozen, so Gobber turned him back around to see his face.

"Who did this? Freya to Thor, boy, you're covered in—" he'd raised his hook hand to gesture to all of Hiccup, but when he did Hiccup's body flinched and his arms shot up defensively, covering his head. Gobber froze in confusion. He looked at his sharp, gleaming hook, and then at Hiccup's scars, and then at Hiccup. He was shaking. Understanding hit Gobber like a boulder to his chest.

Hiccup thought that he would hit him.

Feeling sick to his stomach, Gobber stepped quickly away and lowered his arm. He tried to find something, anything to do next. "Hiccup, I'm sorry, I didn't—" Hiccup was still frozen in place, hands trying to lower from his face but unable to make it very far. It was pure instinct. He was shaking. He was trying to stop, but it was no use. "I—I think you ought to go home for now. You've helped me a lot today, you—you ought to get some rest." Gobber hid his hook from view as Hiccup shoved on his tunic and darted from the room.

Hiccup walked to the Haddock house by himself, but Gobber watched protectively from the forge window. After sunset, Stoick came by to ask how it'd gone. Gobber didn't know what to say.

It was probably better for everyone that they hadn't been at the house, because Hiccup was having loud and horrible nightmares about how he'd gotten those scars, and neither his father nor Gobber would have been able to help wake him from the fear.

\* \* \*

><p>After Alvar sold him to the nameless travellers, Hiccup started seeing a great deal more dragons than he was used to in the continent. All of them were in cages. Most of them were either small breeds or juveniles, small enough to manhandle and subdue with no actual training. They were all scared. Some of them, the newly captured ones, were furious. One or two, like the monstrous nightmare that Hiccup had met first, had their fire ducts cut. Most of the others were tightly muzzled, left powerless except to stew smoke out of their nostrils.</p>

He spent about two days speaking to no one but dragons, but even they were hardly good conversation. Hiccup only understood some of the words they used, and mostly they were too angry or terrified to tell him anything useful. The people around him did not speak norse, it seemed, and he did even know how to begin learning their language.

On the third day of their journey, they brought a skinny man over to where Hiccup shuffled along in the procession. Whereas his captors were all dark-haired and tan skinned, this man had freckles and dusty brown hair that reminded Hiccup of home.

"You are norseman?" The man asked in the clumsy accent of an interpreter who is only quasi-fluent, but desperate to stay on his employers' good sides.

"Yes," Hiccup replied.

"I am Hakon," said the man. "My mother was northerner. I am translator for these men,"

Hiccup nodded. The men around the two were watching their interaction intently, eager to learn about their new slave. Hiccup swallowed and asked. "Who are they?"

Hakon looked uncomfortable. "Traders. Of a kind." He glanced at a dragon cage that rumbled in a cart alongside them as they walked.

"They trade dragons?" Hiccup asked.

"They trade nothing. They profit from dragons' blood." Hiccup frowned, not understanding. Hakon explained, "they travel roads to cities, find bad places, dig pits, arenas. Dragons are hungry, forced to fight each other. People put money bets which dragon will win. Men keep portion money. Move to next city."

Hiccup understood, but that didn't mean he comprehended why. His jaw had fallen open. "That's barbaric," he said. Hakon let out a short and humorless laugh.

"You are the barbarian here, norseman," he reminded the captive. "They have bought you to help control dragons. They lose many men trying to control them."

"And why should I help them?"

"Because. You do not, they starve you and make you to fight dragons," Hakon told him calmly. "In past there was other man, speaks better Norse than I know. He lost much money in bad speaking. Bets placed on his fight earned double normal earnings." He let this sink in and added, "Do not let them make money with your blood. Do as told."

Hakon had a short exchange with a man who seemed to be in some position of leadership. The dark-haired southerner nodded. He gave Hiccup an appraising look, and then spoke quickly at Hakon, before nodding at Hiccup. Hakon cleared his throat and told Hiccup,

"He tells you to talk to his dragons," he relayed, "He want big dragon to be calm before match tomorrow night. Easy to handle. Cooperative."

Hiccup could not believe what they were asking of him. "I refuse," He said adamantly. The southerner could not understand the words, but the tone was familiar. He glared and stepped forward.

"Oska, do not," warned Hakon, but the southern man had already raised his fist. It smacked across Hiccup's jaw hard enough to make his nose bleed and ears ring. He fell to the ground and had to dig himself up by a muddy cart wheel before his chains started dragging him on the ground.

"He ask again you to calm dragon," Hakon said form above him, a warning tone in his voice. The southern man was glaring. He had drawn his knife. Hiccup wiped blood from his mouth.

"Fine," he said, in a smaller tone. He planned on disregarding the order, but the southerner could not tell that. Hakon heard the tone and looked worried. He translated, and the leader nodded, before prodding Hiccup toward the cage of a restless nadder.

I will kill you, \_it hissed through its muzzle, \_I will kill you all. \_

Hakon came up behind Hiccup and warned him, "Do not do what you plan, Oska," he whispered despite being the only other one around who understood norse. "One way or other, you will die."

Hiccup stared at the bloody, furious dragon in front of him, and the chains on his neck and wrists and ankle. Would that be so bad? \_

\* \* \*

><p>Hiccup had no way of knowing it at the time, but the chains that bound him would not leave his skin for nearly two years. He would wear them in the sun, in the water, to bed and to the bathroom, he would learn how to dress and undress around them, learn how to pick off fleas and lice from underneath them where they liked to hide. He would learn to ignore the sores they rubbed into his skin.<p>

But the chains were periphery. First and foremost, there were the dragons, and the angry men who tortured them. He never learned any of the men's names. He asked for the dragon's names at first, but he learned quickly not to grow attached. None of them lasted very long.

The dragon fights were primal, bloody, and to the death. They starved the dragons for days up to each fight, not long enough for them to grow weak, but long enough that they would eat anything "anything in sight once they got into the ring. Once all bets were in and the bell rang, two big dragons or several small ones were released into metal arenas built in underground stadiums. The winner would not leave until it had had its fill of the loser. This was convenient in two was: first because everyone loved a good show, and secondly, there was no need to buy dragon feed.

During the matches, the cavernous chambers echoed with the raucous cheers and foul language of gamblers and lowlifes aching for a good time. The sordid air filled with smoke and sweat. Every hallway and cell smelled of alcohol, vomit, sulfer, and stale urine. It seemed as though each city on the easternmost borders of the Roman Empire had a hidden world manufactured just for this purpose, and they found each and every one of them as they travelled further south. When he still had his mind about him, Hiccup wondered if they had bartered with Hel herself for the real estate.

After several months on the road, they made it to a new country, some place Hakon called 'Bulgaria'. There, after smuggling themselves past the border, they arrived at the largest of all the underground arenas Hiccup had ever seen. There were at least ten fighting arenas here, and dozens upon dozens of cellblocks to keep dragons locked away before their fight. He had expected to move on from this place as they had with all the others, but to Hiccup's surprise, this is where they stayed. The men found cheap housing above ground and enough women to keep them occupied. As for Hiccup, the dragon whisperer

would not see sunlight for well over a year.

In this hidden hell, Hiccup's job evolved as his captors' needs changed. He calmed dragons, he wrestled dragons to the ground, he 'tamed' dragons and prodded them from outside their cages, riling them up for the fight. Sometimes he tried to refuse. They'd beat him. First it was just fists and feet, but then it was metal-tipped whips and hot irons. He gave in. He healed. Then he'd try again. Each time he refused to do their bidding, he grew weaker. Somewhere along the way, they'd broken him. Now he was just like their emaciated dragons, doing everything he said he'd never do just to survive. He lived in the dirt, underground like the dragons. He didn't get to wash, or shave. He was an animal — a maimed, witless animal. His hair grew out. His beard, which was hardly anything to brag on at his young age, was flea-bitten and haggard. He did everything he could to not feel anything.

They even made him fight, sometimes. They laughed at him, because he did not understand their language and moved like a rabid dog, darting eyes and cringing away if a boot got too close. They'd lock him in his own cell and starve him for a few days, and on the days when they made him fight, the audience would be twice as large as normal. He was too valuable to kill, so they kept his opponents on chains in case worse came to worse, but they were long chains, and the men who held the other ends knew to wait until the last possible moment. If he lost, he would live, but he would not eat. Hiccup learned not to lose.

When he did lose he would cry over his wounds. They would drag his bloodied, weak carcass into his cell and dump him there. Hakon was sent to tend to him. Hakon was the only one who had any scrap of care for Hiccup, and even that was only because he was paid to.

When Hiccup's wounds were especially bad, Hakon would talk to Hiccup in Norse as he treated his injuries, to keep him awake and talking. He started teaching Hiccup Latin words (which apparently was his native language) by saying a Norse word followed closely by its Latin translation. Oddly, incapacitated and hurting as he was, it was in these rare moments of human language that Hiccup found an internal escape, a reminder that he was a human. He cried because he was hurt, but he also cried because he was human. If he weren't human, it would have been easier to let go. Hakon never asked why Hiccup asked time and time again what the Latin word for 'toothless' was. \_Endentulus. \_He repeated it over and over again as he fell asleep.

Unfortunately, after about six months in his captor's care, Hiccup's lack of hygiene, pubescent growth, chronic injuries, and the festering sore at the end of his stump came together in a perfect storm.

"Gods above," He moaned to no one, because no one was listening. "Gods, kill me, kill me it hurts," He was only half-awake. It was the middle of the night and he didn't know what he was saying. Someone snapped at him to shut up, but he couldn't hear them. He moaned in agony. "Make it stop, make it \_stop, \_Toothless, just kill me, please, \_please kill me,\_" He cried in feverish pain.

They brought Hakon to see him. By torchlight, the man examined Hiccup with rudimentary medical knowledge and relayed what Hiccup was

saying. It was fever talk. He was delirious. But why? They uncovered his stump leg and saw for themselves: an infected, gangrenous lump, eating up through his veins. They all grumbled at that. For a while, they considered killing him. He'd earned them more money than they'd had in ages, but he was done in. It would be simpler to just skewer him, maybe let him 'fight' in the ring one last time and let the dragon win for good.

But the commotion drew the attention of their leader. A jaded, greedy man, he argued with his subordinates for over an hour, grilling them on what they could and could not do, threatening that one of them would take Hiccup's place as his moneymaker and dragon wrangler, should the boy die. From among them, one with more medical knowledge than most proposed a plan. The leader waved a hand and ordered it to be so.

Hiccup was still feverish when they pinned him down on the poorly-lit table and stuck a fold of leather between his teeth. In the repressed archives of his memory, it was all somehow alarmingly familiar.

He smelled the strong, pure alcohol. He felt the tight pressure of the tourniquet around his thigh, how it pinched his skin and made his leg throb from the pressure. He felt the dozen hands shift on his legs and arms, preparing for him to thrash. Later, when he tried to remember, his memories would cut off about as soon as the saw came out. He would never fully remember the amputation itself. He'd been unconscious when they'd had to chop off his foot, but this time he was wide awake and screaming, six men holding him down while the sloppy deed was done. For most of his life, Hiccup would forget every bloody detail of how he'd lost his left knee and half of his thigh. Some things, as any battlefield doctor could tell you, were just too much for the human mind to process.

Then again, the memories didn't leave, not completely. They were still there, deep, deep down, waiting to resurface in just the right nightmare. When the time came, it would all come back. Every detail, every nerve, every jerk when saw stuck in bone, every hand on his body, every injury that had led up to this, every drop of blood he'd shed, every dragon he'd killed, every time he'd hurled in the arena because the stench was too much, every smear of blood he'd left on the ground when they drug him back to his cell and wrapped his leg in half-clean gauze. Every cockroach, every rat, every tick that came to visit what would have been his deathbed. Should have been.

Hiccup woke up screaming. He was covered in sweat and tangled in the bedsheets of home. He looked around himself, saw the sunlight in the windows, his pegleg resting on the floor. He realized he'd been dreaming, and braced for his father to come and check on him. Stoick never appeared, and Hiccup realized he must be alone in the house. He drug himself to a wastebucket and wretched into it, only to turn away so the smell wouldn't bring back memories. He drug himself awkwardly across the floor and heaved open a window. The sweat and tears on his face made the breeze feel even cooler than it was. He savored it. He jumped when a gronkle's rumble sounded from outside. Amid the darkened sky, he could make out the shape of a round brown dragon. It grumbled at him curiously from the roof next door. Hiccup whispered to it.

"\_Sorry.\_"

"\_What for?" \_it was so polite. He hoped they wouldn't make him fight it. No, \_no, \_he told himself, that had been a nightmare. A memory. This was different. It was so hard for him to tell the difference.

"\_I don't know." \_

"\_You were scared." \_

"\_It was a nightmare." \_

"\_Nightmares are nothing to be afraid of." \_

"\_It was a memory." \_

"\_Oh. I am sorry." \_

"Hey, Meatlug! C'mere, girl, I got some great new rocks to try out! Gobber says he thinks they might burn hotter than coal, and wants to see if they'll, uhâ€|. Uhhâ€|. Help." Fishlegs had trailed off because he'd seen Hiccup. Hiccup spotted him and ducked behind the window frame. Meatlug leaped down from her perch and gobbled up the rocks that her master offered before spitting them out in a sulfurous heap (Fishlegs took notes on the flames). Hiccup almost heaved again at the smell. He pulled the shutters closed with shaking hands, blocking his nose and trying not to remember the fighting. The fights had gotten so much more bloody, so much more painful after the leg. They hadn't let him fully heal before he went back in the ring, didn't give him a prosthetic. A true cripple drew larger crowds.

Unbidden, his nightmare reawakened in his head, and Hiccup's hand shot up to the pendant around his neck, rubbing the dark, worn dragon scale he kept tucked under his shirt. Stoick found him there that evening when he brought him his dinner. This time he only sighed and left Hiccup alone, not wanting to make it worse than it already was.

Later, Fishlegs would go to Gobber to report his findings, and ask absently what had happened with Hiccup at the forge. Gobber wouldn't say.

Back at the house, Hiccup was fiddling with paper and pencil again, and scratched absently at the scars that still itched his back.

## 5. Constantinopolis

\*\*A/N: \*\*A few things: First, a huge thank you to my dear LJ9, who was kind enough to beta this chapter. Something about this story has been giving me trouble, and she helped me see what I need to work on and captured an army of typos. Secondly, I apologize in advance for the horrible Latin. It's been a while since I studied Latin, and I was never all that fantastic at it.

\* \* \*

><p>"He's drawing again," Stoick told Gobber a few days later. They'd been meeting every day to swap notes on Hiccup's progress.<p>

They called it progress so that they could keep their spirits high. No one really knew if Hiccup was improving â€“ they weren't even sure if Hiccup knew. He still had nightmares often; Stoick had tried to intervene several times, but Hiccup reacted violently, hitting and smacking with surprising strength even when drowsy. He refused to talk to Stoick for whole days afterward whenever he tried to help. There were also the scars, and though Gobber never mentioned them again, Hiccup had caught him staring more than once, brows furrowed as he traced one mark or another with his eyes. No one knew how to help during the panic attacks, when he would rock back and forth and cradle his necklace.

Helping Hiccup was hard. He didn't seem to ever want it, and moreover, he wasn't sure how to accept it. Human interaction of any kind baffled him. Almost everyone on Berk had caught him chattering easily with their dragons, but whenever his fellow humans attempted to speak with him, Hiccup would clam up awkwardly. He wasn't fearful of people, not as though they would hurt him, but he no longer knew what to expect from them. The last time he'd been treated like a real person was when he was a boy. Now, as a man of twenty-one, he only knew how to be a servant. Being human should have been freeing; instead it was uncomfortably new.

But for Hiccup, drawing in his sketchbook meant significant progress.

"Well, that's good." Gobber sounded genuinely pleased. He put down his work and turned to listen intently. "What sort of things has he been drawing?"

Stoick shrugged. "He hasn't shown me much. Hides when he sees I'm looking. I've peeked a few times. He draws buildings. Dragons â€“ kinds I've never seen before. Occasionally people. There is one design, though, some sort of mechanism orâ€¦ or gadget. I don't recognize it. He's been working on it for days. You should ask him about it, see if he wants to build something."

Gobber let out a small laugh and nodded over at the massive pile of fire pokers, nails, barrel rings, and shovels that he would spend months selling. "I think he's set me up for a while. He's ready to move onto bigger projects. I'll see what I can do."

\* \* \*

><p>The next day, as Hiccup sorted through old metal scraps, tossing the rustier bits into a melting pot and picking out the better bits to reuse, Gobber glanced over to where he'd set his sketchbook on the table. He wondered if Stoick had told him to take it today.<p>

It'd been a slow morning; he didn't think conversation would seem amiss, even for a jumpy lad like Hiccup. "Sketches?" he asked, pointing to the book. Hiccup stiffened and darted his eyes to the journal. He gulped, and shrugged.

"You sketched a lot as a kid, don't know if you remember." Hiccup said nothing, and Gobber prayed he hadn't hit a nerve. "I wager you've gotten good at it." Still no response. Gobber sighed and turned back to his work, tossing over his shoulder, "Well, anyway, if you ever draw up something you want to build, just let me know. You can make whatever you like."

Hiccup looked up at that, interest piqued. After a long pause, he went back to work, but he sat a bit more relaxed in his seat, hands moving a bit more easily.

After lunch, Hiccup came up to Gobber silently and presented him with the designs. Gobber's eyebrows rose when he saw them.

"Odin's beard," he breathed, looking at the thin lines and intricate shapes. "What's this, then?" He turned it and examined it. The letters were unfamiliar. He thought he recognized them from the exotic books Johann had sold to Stoick in years gone by. Latin? With no help from words, he studied the images to decipher Hiccup's plans.

"Is this a leg?" He pointed to a bit that looked like a foot. Hiccup gestured up at the top of the thing, which would fit much higher on a leg than his old prosthetic.

"Straps on up here," he said.

"And what's this?"

"A knee."

Gobber scoffed. He'd never seen a prosthetic with a knee. Not a working one, anyway. He glanced sidelong at Hiccup, who seemed completely serious and sure of himself. "How's it work?"

Engrossed in the design, Hiccup gestured with his hands loosely. "It uses a steel hinge with spring coils, to bring the knee up after the foot moves. Seal it with oil and a bit of leather, it works well for a very long time, and doesn't!" Gobber coughed quietly, and Hiccup stiffened as if surprised, eyeing Gobber nervously. He looked down and held his hands together in front of him. "â€|rust," he finished quietly. Gobber squinted at the picture.

"And ehâ€| where'd you get all this?" Had he designed it himself?

Hiccup shrugged. "Logothete Kaloethes had one made for me."

The name made one of Gobber's eyebrows shoot up in confusion, but he tried to mask his surprise. "And what happened to it?" Hiccup still wouldn't look at him.

"I lost it."

Gobber suspected there was a larger story behind the answer, but this was the most words he'd heard out of Hiccup since he'd arrived and didn't want to press him. "Alright. Well, I can't read that. Tell me what you need."

Hiccup nodded, and squinted at the hodgepodge of Greek and Latin. It'd been a long time since he'd had to translate between Latin and Norse.

\* \* \*

><p>Dragon fighting was illegal in the Roman Empire.</p>

The Roman Empire was not what it used to be, but the Romans had not lost their sense of law and order. When a watchman stumbled upon the entrance into the massive fighting ring beneath the Bulgarian town of Hrazgrad, he called in reinforcements. It was as if they had poured acid into an anthill.

The fighters ran away, some taking dragons with them, some abandoning ship empty-handed. There was screaming, swords, and blood. The leaders (most of them, at least) were captured, and some of them were killed on the spot when they tried to fight back. The excitement dwindled as the Romans began sorting through the aftermath, rounding up dragons and supplies, clearing out the bodies.

They'd left Hiccup to rot in his cell. Aside from being in a locked room, he blended in perfectly with the putrid corpses next door. He was close to dead when the Romans found him, hair crawling with bugs, skin so dirty it was impossible to tell what color it was. He could hear them as they spoke over him, but could only understand a few words.

"\_Estne mortuus?" \_

"\_Non scio." \_

"\_Eam pungere." \_

Something hit him in the side. Voices above him, muttering. Something hit him in the side again, and it hit a sorely healing rib. He groaned.

"\_Stercus sanctus!" \_

"Leader \_arcessare!" \_

"Alive!"

"\_Foedus est." \_

"\_Sic." \_

There were more pairs of boots shuffling loudly into the cell. Gloved hands grabbed him and dragged him up. He groaned again. The blood rushed from his head as they lifted him and he fell unconscious.

He woke up again to the rasping of a sharp blade against his scalp. Oh, sweet relief. The squirming, itching matt that had once been a thick head of auburn fell away and he could've cried for how good it felt to be free. Then they started lathering on the lice-eating soap, and he did cry â€“ partially because it stung his eyes, partially because he hadn't been lice-free in over a year. He could not find strength to open his eyes, so he did not see how his caretakers were wincing at his flea-bitten skin.

While Hiccup dozed, they shaved his head, his beard. They scrubbed off the mud and soaked him in baths and oils to remove the ticks and fleas. They trimmed his nails and sewed up his wounds. His leg got special attention, though the seam on his stump had somehow sealed up cleanly after his nasty amputation months prior.

If Hakon had taught him more Latin, Hiccup would have realized that most of their grumbling concerned his slavemark, which hadn't been visible until they'd shaved his head. He was informed later that he'd very nearly been sent to trial with the rest of the dragon-ring fighters. His slavemark, in a cruel, ironic twist, had saved him from guilt by association.

When he woke up and they attempted to communicate, it became clear that he did not know Latin. He could point to objects and name them, but conversation was impossible. After a few hours, they brought in an academic-looking fellow in thick blue and red robes. To Hiccup's immense surprise and pleasure, he spoke Norse. And not the haltered, awful Norse that Hakon had used, but good, fluent, if somewhat slurred Norse.

"How do you feel?" the translator asked. "Do you have any injuries that the doctors should know about?"

"I do not know," Hiccup answered faithfully, voice hoarse from exhaustion. "I can't tell what hurts and what doesn't, anymore."

The translator frowned in sympathy, and relayed this to the guard by the door. "We will keep an eye on it. Are you hungry? Thirsty?"

Hiccup shifted uncomfortably, compelled to duck his head and look away as he talked to the man. Asking for things was not normal for him. He shrugged. "Water?"

"Of course." The man spoke briefly in Latin and a nurse produced a cup. Hiccup drank from it as though it were the sweetest nectar.

"What is your name?"

"Oska."

Because the man knew Norse, Hiccup was afraid that he would translate the horrible name into an equally embarrassing Latin name. However, when he turned to the others, Hiccup could hear him use the name 'Oska.' He felt grateful.

After a few more pleasantries, that was that. Hiccup was given a small room with a cot and a basin. It was not much; next to nothing, actually, but to him, it was Valhalla and more. It was clean, dry, and warm. He slept for days at a time.

His leg made it difficult for him to walk, and he was given crutches to move around. It was only after he started hobbling outside of his room that he learned where he was. It was a hospital, a whole complex of buildings dedicated to medicine and recovery. He'd never seen anything like it, and wore his translator to irritation with all of his questions.

His translator's name was Carius. He was a former officer of the military who'd retired to this area with his family some years ago. The Tagma (a broad term for the Roman military) had contacted him because of his knowledge of Norse. Hiccup was not sure if he could classify Carius as a friend, but he was kind to Hiccup, and that was more than Hiccup could have said for anyone he'd known in nearly four

years.

Four years. He'd been gone for four years — perhaps a few months less. It felt like so much longer. The last months passed quickly. Hiccup's leg healed over, his skin stopped developing sores, the bugs left him alone. He gained enough weight to cover the jagged ends of his ribs and spine, and his hair grew back to a peach-fuzz brown. He used his crutches to walk outside often in the warm sea air. It wasn't the Baltic, but the salt in the air resurrected something deep within Hiccup's chest that allowed him to sleep at night. But he knew it wouldn't last. He was a slave.

"What will they do with me?" Hiccup asked Carius one day. The translator only visited occasionally now that Hiccup's health was in no danger. Language barriers became less important when you could move around on your own.

Carius shrugged. "I imagine they will sell you," he said frankly. "Were you not a cripple, they might have kept you within the Tagma, taught you Latin. But the army is no place for a one-legged man, even a one-legged servant."

Hiccup nodded in resignation.

"They will probably send you to Mesembria."

"Where is that?"

"It's a port."

"Will they sell me there?" Hiccup thought back to that horrible day when he'd first been sold. How young, how innocent he'd been. Bitter scars rubbed against his heart.

Carius shrugged. "It's likely."

"What sort of people buy slaves there?"

"All sorts. Savory, unsavory. Eastern, Western, Roman, Bulgarian. Your lot in life will largely depend on what you can do. And, given your leg, what you can't do." Carius' up-front manner could never be described as compassionate, but it was practical. "What can you do, Oska? Do you have any particular skills?" Casting a critical eye over the boy's still-weakened body he asked, "Anything that would give someone a reason to buy you?"

"I was a blacksmith." Hiccup remembered. It was so long ago. "I made weapons, tools, gear."

Carius' left eyebrow rose very high at that, suspecting a lie. "A slave blacksmith? That's a freeman's trade, Oska."

Hiccup set his jaw. "I was a freeman," he whispered, feeling disconnected from the fact. They'd taken that from him years ago, and he'd forgotten what it'd felt like. "Growing up."

Carius seemed to understand. Later, Hiccup would wonder if it was common for formerly free foreigners with a slavemark to get mixed up in Rome.

"It could help you. But blacksmiths usually buy slaves much bigger than you; stronger, with all their limbs intact."

Hiccup pursed his lips and sighed. After a moment of silence, he added:

"I can talk to dragons."

Carius stopped in his tracks and turned to stare. Hiccup paused on his crutches and, for the first time in weeks, made full eye contact with another person. His eyes were steel. Wounded, calloused, and terrified, but unmoving.

"\_Talk \_to them?" Carius repeated, to be sure.

"Why else would the dragon fighters keep a one-legged man alive for so long?" Hiccup said, with a dry hatred in his tone. "I was their dragon tamer." Carius stared him down for a solid ten seconds, searching for any hint of deception. When he was done, Hiccup was relieved to look away.

"Well then," the translator said evenly. "You will want to make that \_incredibly \_clear before you step up on the auction block. You are far more valuable with dragons than you are as a blacksmith."

"I can't speak Latin to tell anyone," Hiccup protested.

"Can you read Norse?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'll find a paper and pen."

The next week, holding himself up on crutches as he stood waiting inside the fort of Mesembria, Hiccup clung to the paper Carius had written out for him, Latin words translated into Norse phonetics. He'd been memorizing the syllables frantically, pronouncing and re-pronouncing the words just as he'd been taught. He wasn't sure who he was supposed to tell about his talents, or if he should wait until he was asked, but Hiccup was bound and determined to pronounce every last sound perfectly.

It was a good thing he'd memorized it so well, because his ability to communicate his talents clearly and quickly would save him from more than just an unsavory new master.

Waiting on the platform was the hardest part. Mesembria was busy, but the slave market was not the only attraction here. Unlike the tension-filled auction block where he'd been sold to Alvar, the market at Mesembria was long and casual. Buyers haggled prices and there were rarely bidding wars between two clients. Slaves were bought at a slow pace, and Hiccup was left standing on his one good leg for hours at a time with nothing to do but have others stare at him. Hopefully they'd like what they saw.

Carius had been kind enough to find Hiccup some good clothes before he was sent away. They were dull white and horribly plain, as were all the clothes of slaves, but they fit him nicely and made him look ten times healthier than he probably was. The pure white fabric made his pale skin look tanner than it was, hundreds of freckles standing

out in a way that the locals found exotic. His skinny arms were hidden by the generous sleeves, and the wide neck of the tunic showed his neck and shoulders which, despite the traumas of recent months, had persisted in filling out nicely through puberty. In all, despite so many shortcomings, Hiccup looked rather handsome. Far handsomer than the old, haggard and snarling slaves that stood to his left and right. He could not appreciate his own looks because he was too busy feeling tried and hot and concentrating on not falling over.

However, the youngest daughter of the Kaloethes family did not overlook Hiccup's fair appearance. She smiled at him and waved. If Hiccup hadn't spent his pubescent years underground and in a frozen wasteland, he might've recognized it as a flirtatious wave. He ignored it.

It was about an hour after that when the head of the Kaloethes family approached the slavemaster with an exasperated look on his face and a smiling daughter around sixteen years old at his elbow. Two other women, one with greying hair and one with long, dark hair, waited behind with disapproving looks.

Hiccup tried his best to hear what they were saying. He'd learned some Latin from Carius, but could still only make out some of what was said.

"How. Price. Norseman slave." Oh. Was this man interested in buying him? Hiccup felt an old bolt of anger rage through him at the thought of being owned, but then, there was the newer, more familiar need for safety. Security. Survival. This man looked safe.

The slavemaster spoke: "Sixty. Only one leg." Hiccup sighed, wishing he'd still had his knee, his old prosthetic. How far he'd fallen, wishing for his leg back just so he could be sold to the most appealing buyer.

Kaloethes looked back at his daughter, a halfhearted question in his eyes. She said something to him, and he back to her, and she made a pitiful face. He sighed with longsuffering resignation and turned back to the slave master. Arms crossed, he looked at Hiccup and approached.

He inspected Hiccup's short hair, his slavemark. He made a comment about freckles that Hiccup did not understand. He looked at his teeth, his biceps, his hands and callouses. He looked at his leg insofar as he confirmed that there was only one. Finally, he looked at Hiccup's eyes, his own brown gaze digging into Hiccup's very soul, trying to discern the character behind the freckled face.

"Alright," he said in Latin, and Hiccup was proud of himself for understanding. When Kaloethes spoke again, he did not do as well. "This slave. My daughter... suitable. Serve."

The slavemaster glanced hesitantly, perhaps almost even sympathetically, at Hiccup, but nodded easily at Kaloethes. "Yes. we do that. Talk to my doctor. long recovery. will stay."

Kaloethes interrupted: "I understand. Place rest."

The slavemaster shrugged. "Let it be so." He gestured to an employee, and Hiccup was brought down from the platform, crutch under his arm. He expected to be handed straight over to his new master, but instead he was taken past the family and to a ramada some yards beyond. Several men lounged in the shade, waiting for buyers to request their services.

Hiccup knew only vaguely what these 'services' entailed. There were doctors here who inspected slaves with health problems before they were sold. There was a man working a bellows who would brand slaves upon a buyer's request. Hiccup feared for a moment that he was going to be branded, but his escort marched him past the fire without even a glance. He was taken to a curtained-off section with a table, on which he was asked to sit. The head of the Kaloethes family reappeared with a man who held a toolkit of some variety.

"â€|have two daughtersâ€| do notâ€|. Slaveâ€| unsuited." Hiccup was picking up a strange pitch in the man's voice, a sort of undertone of a meaning he couldn't place. The man with tools glanced at Hiccup and told his client,

"You knowâ€|. Not as strongâ€|. Change hisâ€|.. different valueâ€|"

Kaloethes shrugged. "â€|serves my daughterâ€|. must be done."

The man shrugged, and approached Hiccup. Hiccup had been frowning deeply in concentration to understand their Latin, but now he frowned even deeper as the tool man opened his kit and revealed a whole army of sharp, pointy, and threatening objects. Hiccup glanced around and confirmed that there was nothing else that the man could be preparing for. Hiccup was the object. But what the hellâ€|?

The tool man picked out something that looked like a clamp and another tool that looked like scissors, but worse. He said something to the men who'd escorted Hiccup to the room. The men came up on their side of Hiccup and grabbed him, pushing him back until he was lying flat on the table. One of them put a damp cloth over his face that smelled foul. Hiccup's vision swirled, and he realized he was being drugged. But what for? The men grabbed at his leg and his stump, and spread them apart.

With a wave of terror, Hiccup realized what was happening. Daughter. Serve. Suitable for service. He was being bought to serve a master's daughter, and they wanted to make sure he posed no threat to her â€" or her virtue â€" ever.

Oh, hell no.

Hiccup screamed behind the cloth and wrenched his head around it. "Get off of me!" He snapped in Norse, which did little good. He kicked at one of the men with his good leg, and his stump was too short for the other to hold on to. They grabbed his arms and shoved the cloth back toward his face, but he fought back violently, wiry muscles bunching to kick and hit wherever he could. The surgeon set down his tools and yelled some orders, but the men had to fight for control. "I've killed dragons bigger than you!" Hiccup roared â€" because it felt like he was back in the arena, and his instincts were taking over. "I'll rip you apart!"

Of course, the Romans couldn't understand him. Hiccup was a bundle of survival instincts ignited, but there were three of them and only one of him. They had swords; he had one leg. They would overcome him eventually. Hiccup caught sight of the Kaloethes family's shadows silhouetted behind the curtain, and he turned his attention there. Desperately, he shouted the only halting Latin phrases he knew:

"Please! Please! I am capable, I forge and build well." He kicked a man in the chest. "Make toolsâ€| weapons... I train dragons, I speak with dragons," He paused to bite the hand of the second man, who was attempting to smother him with the drug-laced cloth. "I can work with dragons better than anyone, please!" His head slammed against the table as they pinned him down, but he did manage to kick the surgeon in the chest.

Busy defending his masculinity, Hiccup didn't bother listening to the commotion beyond the curtain. Even if he had, the Latin would've flowed so fast he wouldn't have understood a syllable. Two voices argued, one male, one female. Just as the surgeon got a good hold of Hiccup's ankle and the cloth went firmly over his mouth, two of the Kaloethes family appeared.

The commotion stopped, and Hiccup was released. He sat up immediately, seething and breathing hard. He glared at the men who'd restrained him, and watched anxiously while the surgeon spoke with Kaloethes. His daughter â€" the elder, dark-haired one â€" was also present, and she glanced at Hiccup with a mixture of annoyance and pity.

The slavemaster appeared a few moments later, drawn by the commotion. He spoke with Kaloethes and the surgeon in brisk tones; none of them seemed incredibly pleased. After a while, Kaloethes turned to Hiccup. Arms crossed, he said something in Latin. When his attempt was met with blank lack of comprehension he sighed and tried again more slowly, with pointing hand motions.

"You speak Latin?" he asked. Hiccup licked his lips, trying to remember the correct words. Carius had been trying to make him conversational, though they had made little progress before the Tagma sent him away.

"Iâ€| understandâ€| small parts," he said deliberately. Kaloethes nodded. With more pointing, he said slowly,

"My daughter- " He indicated the dark-haired woman. "-takes pity on you. I do not." He sighed heavily. "Butâ€| I workâ€| dragons. Need help. Is it true you can speak to dragons?"

"I have been training dragons since I was a young boy," Hiccup said, just as he'd rehearsed.

Kaloethes nodded, and said something to his daughter. She left, and returned shortly with another servant, who led a miffed young dragon (some variety of nadder or other sharp class, he was willing to bet) and brought it near Hiccup. Everyone in the room took a step away, because the dragon's sharp quills were bristling and smoke trailed from its mouth. Overall it looked rather irritated.

Kaloethes looked at Hiccup and gestured wordlessly to the dragon.

He should have been nervous, but even just \_seeing \_a dragon brought Hiccup into a strange state of confidence. He knew dragons. He didn't know Latin, he didn't know Roman customs, he didn't \_want \_to know about surgery, but dragons he knew.

"\_Hello," \_Hiccup said to it. Its head darted to look at him in surprise.

"\_What?" \_it said in confusion.

"\_My name is Hiccup, what is yours?"\_

"\_You stupid creatures can speak?"\_

"\_Of course we speak, just not always in the same language as you. Do you have a name among dragons?"\_

The dragon shifted from foot to foot, glancing up at all the humans looking at it. \_"I am called Clawgiver," \_it said in a suggestive way. Hiccup smiled slightly. Wonder how it'd earned \_that \_name. He glanced up at Kaloethes, searching for direction and affirmation. Kaloethes' said nothing. Hiccup looked back down at Clawgiver.

"\_Is this man your master?"\_

"\_He feeds me and makes me do menial things."\_

"\_Like what?"\_

"\_I carry human paper all over the city."\_

"\_What, like messages? Written messages?"\_

"\_If that is what you humans call it, then yes."\_

"\_That doesn't sound so bad. You can fly around, see the sights. I bet the city is beautiful from above."\_

Clawgiver shuffled his feet. "\_Wellâ€œ I suppose it'sâ€œ nice."\_

"\_I escaped from an underground fighting ring. Your job is a good one." \_

Clawgiver looked suddenly scared. \_"You escaped the hellrings?"\_

"\_I was taken from there. The evil men were punished."\_

"\_But why were you there? You are not a dragon."\_

"\_I speak dragonese. I was a freak for the fighting. I earned many scars there."\_

"\_That is abominable." \_Clawgiver hopped up onto the table beside Hiccup. The people around them looked alarmed, but Hiccup remained calm, even as Clawgiver nuzzled his arms and back, licking and sniffing the scars there.

"â€œEat him!" the Kaloethes daughter exclaimed, alarmed. Her father shook his head, watching.

"\_Do they hurt?" \_Clawgiver asked.

"\_Not much." \_With the dragon sounding sympathetic to his plight, Hiccup pressed on, though he did his best to keep the urgency from his tone.\_ "Listen, I am a human slave. Your master is debating whether or not to purchase me. If he does, it will be because I speak with dragons. I would much rather work for him than for other, worse men. I need your help to convince him."\_

"\_What can I do?" \_

"\_Get in my lap and act as docile and happy as you can."\_

"\_That is undignified," \_Clawgiver tipped his chin, affronted.

"\_I will scratch behind your neck plates." \_

"\_Ohâ€œ! if you must." \_So Clawgiver hopped into Hiccup's lap and curled up like a drowsy bird, almost purring as the slave scratched the spot on the back of his skull that the could never reach. After a moment, Hiccup looked up at Kaloethes.

With a sigh and a smile from his daughter, Kaloethes dismissed the surgeon and paid the slavemaster. Clawgiver was led away acting far more docile than before, and Hiccup stood shakily with his crutch.

With all his personal bits intact, Hiccup followed Kaloethes out of the ramada and to the entourage that waited outside. They handed him over to the master of their house and loaded him onto a boat and sailed to somewhere they called Constantinopolis.

And thus, Hiccup became the newest fixture of the Kaloethes household.

The Kaloethes' house was massive: a sprawling villa on the wealthier side of the city, with armies of servants, endless rooms and courtyards. Despite the size of their dwelling, the family was only four members strong. There was the father, Petrus, the mother, Anthusa, the eldest daughter, Anna, and the younger, Cyra.

Cyra had been incredibly upset that her father didn't buy Hiccup to be her personal servant, and was vocal about this at family gatherings. She held a personal vendetta against Anna, who had been the one to convince Petrus that making Hiccup into a eunuch for Cyra's benefit would be an inexcusable cruelty, even for a slave. Cyra still flirted with Hiccup whenever she thought no one was watching. Hiccup still had little to no understanding what flirting looked like. Anna saw them both and snorted with laughter.

Petrus was a begrudging master, and began holding Hiccup to high standards from day one. He was expected to learn Latin as quickly as possible, and began a rigorous schedule of Latin lessons in speaking, reading, and pronunciation. He rose before the sun and went to bed only after everyone else was asleep. He worked all day, either on Latin or on menial jobs around the house. He also took care of the small, soft-scaled pet dragons of the house and made sure they were fed, watered, and out of trouble. However, unlike in years past, Hiccup's hard work was rewarded with generous concessions. He had a

small room to himself with a dry roof, a clean bed, and a water basin; he ate well and could take small breaks in the afternoon for fresh air. He was given time to train under the higher-ranking house slaves and given grace when he made mistakes trying new duties. He was even allowed to speak to his master and family when in casual, private settings. It was more than Hiccup could have hoped for.

But Petrus' biggest accommodation to Hiccup was something that would eclipse all others. During his second week in Constantinopolis, Hiccup was called into one of The master's offices, where a female servant waited by the door. She took his measurements — height, waist, hips, paying special attention to his legs. It was odd and embarrassing, but Hiccup said nothing. The purpose of the measurements would not become clear until later, when a craftsman appeared at the Kaloethes' door with a special package.

It was a prosthetic. An extremely high-quality prosthetic, made especially for Hiccup, engineered to the exact measurements of his height and remaining limb. It had padded leather where it met his leg, and strong wood and steel where it held him up. It even had an operational knee. Hiccup put it on in a daze, ignoring the family and servants who'd gathered to watch. He'd already had trouble believing how nice they'd been to him; this was too much. When he took his first steps, he cried. No one said much about it, so he wiped the tears and carried on.

It did not take him much practice to get used to the leg. Navigating a fake knee was new and challenging, but the sensation of walking on a nerveless leg was familiar. Petrus commented on this one day when Hiccup knelt down to pick up a dragon and stood without trouble.

"You adapt quickly, Oska," he said, glancing up from his bookkeeping. Hiccup always felt awkward speaking to Petrus, but managed to explain,

"I've had a prosthetic before. I used to have more of my leg, down to the knee, but I had a peg leg since I was fourteen."

This admission actually seemed to catch Petrus off guard. "What happened to you then?"

Hiccup was still looking at the dragon, putting it in its kennel for the night. "A large sky dragon bit it off."

"Gods," Petrus exclaimed, "I thought you said you trained them since you were a boy?"

Hiccup nodded. "The dragon was my friend. He took my leg, but saved my life."

"That's remarkable. What happened to the dragon?"

Hiccup paused in his movements, realizing suddenly that he had not thought of that particular dragon in a very long time. He felt guilty for admitting: "Iâ€¢ I don't know."

Petrus nodded and let the conversation die, allowing Hiccup to finish his chores and put the last of the house dragons to bed. Released from duty, Hiccup spent the rest of the night staring at the sky,

hoping beyond hope to see black wings against the stars.

They never came.

Hiccup had lost the luxury of hope long ago. There had been so many other things to worry about, so many ways his life should have ended. He hadn't had time to think in years. Years. But now he was sleeping well, eating well, talking to dragons and walking on an operable leg. Now he had time to wonder, time to steep in the realization of how entirely lost he was. Four years. Thousands of miles. Impossible odds. A whole world to search.

He would never return home, would he? There was no way they were still looking.

Had Toothless looked? Had he been able to fly? Had he gotten himself stranded somewhere?

Had his father held a funeral? Had there been an empty ship? Was Snotlout the new heir?

Quietly, in the privacy of his room, Hiccup whispered to himself in Norse, saddened to his core to find that he'd already adopted a Latin accent.

"Toothless," he said, and felt the full weight of his loneliness fall on his heart when no one answered. "Toothless," he said louder, and rocked his head into his knee. "Gods, bring him back," he prayed in Norse, "bring Toothless, bring anybody." He heaved a small sob, and felt like a boy. He was a boy. He was a boy who'd woken up one day, a thousand miles away in the body of a man with a slavemark. "I want to go home. I want to go home."

He woke up the next morning when the head manservant shook his shoulder. He glanced at the window, at the darkened blue sky without wings. If he were to say something in Norse, he knew no one would understand him.

As Hiccup rose to meet his daily chores, he wondered in his heart if he was too far away. Even Odin Allfather, wandering god of travellers and outcasts, seemed to ignore him. Perhaps Hiccup was dead, in a way.

"Oska, come give me a hand here," Called another slave.

"Coming," he replied, and made himself look away from the sky. Oska had killed Hiccup years ago.

\* \* \*

><p>It was evening on Berk, where within the smithy the parts for Hiccup's prosthetic were all sorted out and placed in groups according to the diagrams. They had all the right measurements and Hiccup had already begun sewing together the leather straps and cup. But the sky was dark, and Gobber suggested that no quality work happened when your eyes started crossing. Hiccup had gone to put his tools away when he found an old book.</p>

It had belonged to Hiccup, years ago. But that was a different Hiccup. That was Hiccup Haddock. Oska flipped through its pages and

studied their content like a stranger. He remembered sketching some of them, but he remembered nothing about what he'd felt. He let the journal lie open on one page in particular, staring at it until he saw blue.

"Hiccup, you still here?" Gobber said from the doorway. Hiccup jumped, his eyes wide as he looked at the blacksmith. Gobber chuckled casually. "Hey, now, lad, it's fine, relax. You need some sleep. Why don't you go home and rest?"

"Alright," Hiccup said quickly, scurrying out of the smithy. Even Gobber's laid-back attitude could not shake Hiccup's skittishness, it seemed. Gobber shook his head and complained about this under his breath, but stopped short when he saw that Hiccup's open book on the desk. He craned his neck around to see the pages lying open. They were all sketches of Toothless.

"Oh, noâ€!" he breathed to himself, and rubbed his eyes. "Tha'sâ€! not going to be good." He closed the book and put it away, hoping Hiccup would not think too hard on it. Sighing heavily, he climbed the stairs to his sleeping loft, muttering to himself all the while. "Jus' one day at a time, Gobber, just take him one day at a time. He'll be fine." Was it a lie? He shook his head and reassured himself. "He'll learn to be fine."

End  
file.